

# Highlights from the 2023 REenvision Housing Symposium

November 2, 2023



**15** Edmonton Metropolitan  
Region Board

## REenvision Housing 2023: Housing for All

### 1.1 Overview of the symposium

On November 2, 2023, the Edmonton Metropolitan Region Board (EMRB) hosted the REenvision Housing Symposium in Edmonton, bringing together elected officials, developers, and builders, thought leaders, practitioners, not for profit, and community builders to explore vital issues related to the housing continuum in the Region, and to identify solutions and pave the way to action.

Symposium speakers and panelists provided knowledge and insights with local, national and international perspectives. The keynote, Chris Fair, President and CEO, Resonance Consultancy Ltd., and author of 'World's Best Cities' shared his research findings on the top things that make communities livable, lovable, and prosperous. The symposium plenary session from Shaun Cathcart, Senior Economist and Director of Housing Data and Market Analysis, Canadian Real Estate Association, spoke of the anticipated housing need across the country, a generational keystone issue that must be addressed collectively, and what the Edmonton Metropolitan Region can expect on the horizon.

This report is a summary of the symposium's key themes explored in breakout sessions and panels, insights shared by panelists, as well as key takeaways and solutions presented.

*Disclaimer: Diverse insights, solutions, and calls to actions were proposed by symposium participants. While included in this report to reflect what we heard, these do not necessarily reflect the policy positions, opinions, or fall within the purview of the EMRB. They are shared as part of a broader commitment by the EMRB to contribute to ongoing regional reflection, discussion, and action.*

### 1.1.1 Symposium Participants & Panelists

Excluding support staff, more than 300 individuals participated in the symposium.

The participants represented a broad cross-section including approximately 31% from local administrations, 20% from industry, 18% elected officials, 15% non-profit, 9% other, and 7% academia.

The symposium featured 35 panelists and guest speakers, including the Honourable Randy Boissonnault, Member of Parliament for Edmonton Centre and Minister of Employment, Workforce Development, and Official Languages, the Honourable Jason Nixon, Minister of Seniors, Community, and Social Services, the Honourable Ric McIver, Minister of Municipal Affairs, and Grand Chief Desmond G. Bull of the Confederacy of Treaty 6 First Nations.

## 2.0 Keynote: The Path to Prosperity: Building More Livable & Lovable Communities

### 2.1 Keynote: The Path to Prosperity: Building More Livable & Lovable Communities

The symposium kicked-off with a plenary keynote address from Chris Fair, futurist and World's Best Cities author, highlighting the values of livable, lovable, and prosperous regions.

- Chris Fair, President and CEO Resonance Consultancy Ltd.

#### 2.1.1 Insights

The main reasons individuals chose where they live: cost of living, safety, affordability/availability of housing, and favorable climate.

The key factors attracting young professionals today: restaurants, sports teams, fortune 500 companies, job opportunities, museums, sights and landmarks, culture, nightlife, connectivity, and shopping.

Components that make a region more lovable:

- Localization: Consumers are seeking authentic connections with brands and buying small and local.
- Socialization: Central business districts (CBDs) are transforming into central social districts, where people come together for play.
- *Retailtainment*: Entertainment uses drive traffic back.
- Wellbeing: The pandemic has fast-tracked and enabled individuals to explore ways in which the built environment influences wellbeing.
- Rewilding: For many, the freedom of natural spaces has been the perfect antidote to confinement, driving visitation to parks and other accessible nature-based destinations and attractions to record levels.
- Nightlife: A robust nighttime economy helps create a 24-hour city status and improves the quality of life for both residents and visitors.
- Inclusivity: COVID-19 further highlighted imbalances in power and resource distributions across our cities, leading to many demanding justice and inclusivity in city design and policies

## 2.1.2 Solutions / Calls to Action

- Create regions that balance livability, lovability, and prosperity.
  - This is a challenge for urban areas around the world. Solving the challenge will require regional planning, and thinking about housing and economic development not as a series of separate focus areas but as an interdependent system that breaks down barriers between departments and disciplines.
  - The most livable, lovable, and prosperous regions will be the most competitive in the 21st century.
- Invest in multi-model regional transportation.
- Create destinations that attract both local and regional visitors.
- Create space and place for the next economy.
- Develop a more diverse range of housing to accommodate generation next. A community cannot be livable, lovable or prosperous if there is nowhere for people to live.

## 3.0 Themes explored in Panels and Breakout Sessions

### 3.1 AM Plenary Panel: Housing for All: Exploring the Housing Continuum

This plenary panel discussion delved into the diverse range of housing challenges and solutions, from houselessness to affordable housing, to market affordable housing and full market housing. The panel was moderated by Mary Rowe, President and CEO, Canadian Urban Institute, with panelists:

- Angie Staines, Founder, 4B Harm Reduction Society
- Bree Claude, Vice President, Customer Experience and Community Partnerships, Civida
- Dr. Joshua Evans, Research Lead, University of Alberta (Affordable Housing Solutions Lab)
- Jodie Wacko, Chief Operating Officer, Cantiro

#### 3.1.1 Insights

There is a need for accessible, supportive housing for our community. This is different than affordable housing – it includes providing health services, recovery sites, access to social services.

For many individuals who are homeless and struggling with mental health or addiction issues, the affordable housing system can be seen as punitive, traumatic, and takes too long.

There are currently more than 1,600 people on the wait list for community housing (social housing) in the Edmonton Region.

The private market on its own can't provide enough affordable housing to meet the demand. Keeping the market housing affordable prevents more people falling into the unhoused/unaffordable part of the spectrum.

If we don't ensure adequate affordable housing in the full market housing spectrum, individuals will trend back into the continuum putting more pressure on the front end of the continuum.

### 3.1.2 Solutions / Calls to Action

- Increase the quantity and availability of affordable housing managed by non-profit organizations by:
  - Increasing opportunities to purchase existing homes;
  - Offsetting costs with early due-diligence investments by non-profits;
  - Finding opportunities to house individuals in existing homes with space available (bedrooms vs. doors)
- Shift the way we think about housing.
  - See housing as a human right with government jointly responsibility to its citizens. This concept could shape housing policy in a different direction with governments taking on a stronger role in investing in affordable housing.
- Rental assistance benefits are highly effective; expanding that program could have an immediate impact.
- Partnerships and innovative policies can help non-profits have a greater impact.
  - For example, freeing up municipal property taxes for affordable housing to allow organizations to put that funding back into their housing maintenance; or offering capital support to purchase existing rental buildings.

## 3.2 AM Breakout Session A: Embracing Multigenerational Living and Innovative Housing Solutions

This breakout session discussed how current financial challenges and evolving needs require innovative housing models that foster multigenerational connections and inclusive communities. The panel was moderated by Kalen Anderson, Executive Director, Urban Development Institute (UDI) – Edmonton Metro, with panelists:

- Adil Kodian, Executive Vice President, ROHIT Group of Companies
- Greg Christenson, President, Christenson Group of Companies
- Dr. Haidong Liang, Executive Director, Westend Seniors Activity Centre

### 3.2.1 Insights

In 2022, over one million households reported they were multigenerational. While different housing products could respond to these needs, current policy can make it expensive to innovate, and new projects are not always allowed in some municipalities.

Priority issues for seniors is access to health care and the desire to stay in their homes as long as possible, not wanting to transfer to a hospital or long-term care setting. Integrating health care into existing communities is a challenge; costs of building new hospitals or long-term care facilities are extremely high.

An age-friendly municipality looks at all the supports, including, but not only housing. There is a need to invest in housing and social capital.

Housing has to evolve with the population trends (bubble) over time. Different ideas are implemented but they do not always work together.

### 3.2.2 Solutions / Calls to Action

- Municipalities and other orders of government must work together to make policy and regulation (for infrastructure, technical requirements, building codes) that respond to the needs without increasing costs (making it less affordable).
- The urban village community (walkable, livable, with all amenities and health care supports) can be less expensive to build than hospitals and can effectively support multigenerational and seniors.
- Examine resources that are already available and think innovatively to repurpose and use these to address the challenges.
- Reward and/or invest in organizations that have taken the initiative to “get stuff done”.



### 3.3 AM Breakout Session B: Closing the Housing Gap: Strategies and solutions for thriving rural communities

This breakout session discussed key topics such as limited access to affordable housing, infrastructure constraints, economic disparities and preserving a rural identity. The panel was moderated by Heather Thomson, Executive Director, University of Alberta (Centre for Cities & Communities) with panelists:

- Linda Bernicki, Director, Community Development and Indigenous Engagement, Rural Development Network (RDN)
- Patrick Shaver, President, Avillia Developments Ltd.
- Paul McLauchlin, President, Rural Municipalities of Alberta (RMA)

#### 3.3.1 Insights

Rural living is a lifestyle choice for some Albertans seeking benefits such as living close to nature and access to outdoor recreational activities. However, in many rural or remote areas, housing insecurity and homelessness are ongoing issues.

According to the Rural Development Network, in 45 Indigenous and remote communities across Alberta, 7,320 people are considered homeless or housing insecure, with 23 per cent of those with insufficient or unaffordable heating.

There is opportunity to grow rural populations with society adopting new ways to work and learn remotely, where it is possible to reside further from the office or school.

Significant challenges for new rural developments are the increased costs for infrastructure, water, and wastewater — and increased financial risks — to new build projects in a remote or rural location.

It is more than just housing; it is about community. Social issues must be addressed to adequately address rural housing needs. It is important to have social services and supports in rural communities to be able to help those who need it.

### 3.3.2 Solutions / Calls to Action

- Consider housing as a human right to address the number of Albertans without sufficient heating and access to safe drinking water.
- Take a holistic approach to rural revitalization with a focus on an improved planning process that incorporates housing with other issues, such as workforce and economic development.
- Share infrastructure costs of construction through formal and informal partnerships for funding and services with the province and municipalities.
- Establish reasonable infrastructure standards for rural developments; these may not be the same as in urban centres.
- Embrace advances in technology for rural developments such as solar, wind power, onsite servicing, and water treatment.
- Maximize the benefits of being smaller, taking advantage of less bureaucracy and quicker approvals.

## 3.4 AM Breakout Session C: The Unseen: Housing Needs and Non-Market Housing

This breakout session shared the unique needs and perspectives from Indigenous communities, challenges facing downtown Edmonton, where and what kind of support is needed. The panel was moderated by Catherine Keill, CEO, Keill & Co Inc., with panelists:

- Kayli Avveduti, Executive Director, Confederacy of Treaty 6 First Nations
- Margot Hagarty, Executive Director, Leduc Regional Housing Foundation
- Nancy Simmonds, CEO, Heartland Housing Foundation

### 3.4.1 Insights

There is an increase in the number of homeless or hidden homeless (e.g., couch surfers).

The Leduc Regional Housing Foundation reports a 30 per cent increase on their wait list since January 2023.

The Confederacy of Treaty 6 First Nations reports an increase in people living in the streets and needing services.

The Region can only thrive with the success of all individual communities. We have seen people move down the housing spectrum and be forced to use the support systems within the City of Edmonton because they cannot afford to remain in regional communities.

A number of First Nations have the need and desire to build more units within the City of Edmonton but face challenges due to lack of funding and support.

### 3.4.2 Solutions / Calls to Action

- Build strong relationships with partners
- Be competitive but also collaborative
- Access housing needs through a consistent assessment tool (both regional and community based, which would provide value to stakeholders)
- Access local needs for housing (need to be ready to act when/if funding comes through) and undertake a regional needs assessment.
- Develop a strong housing strategy.

## 3.5 PM Breakout Session A: Downtown Livability and Challenges in the Centres

This breakout session discussed how centres can be complete communities and looked at solutions for the recovery and livability of centres throughout the Region's diverse rural and urban municipalities. The panel was moderated by Catherine Keill, CEO, Keill & Co. Inc., with panelists:

- Dr. Annette Trimbee, President and Vice-Chancellor, MacEwan University
- Cory Wosnack, Principal and Managing Director, Avison Young
- Jill Robertson, Partner, DIALOG
- Susan McGee, CEO, Homeward Trust

### 3.5.1 Insights

Currently, we are facing complex social challenges with a high need for housing and high rates of homelessness.

The City of Edmonton downtown growth rate has slowed over the past 14 years, with only 2,000 more residents in that period of time.

The City of Edmonton currently has the second highest office vacancy rate in the country at about 18 per cent vacancy.

Edmonton has the advantage of having a robust and growing post-secondary presence downtown, with the potential for more students to live downtown.

We need to shift away from thinking of downtowns as a central business district, it must be thought of as a central social district, with ties together housing, economic, and social aspirations.

Attracting more people to the downtown centres would make it more vibrant, and safer.

### 3.5.2 Solutions / Calls to Action

- Opportunity exists within office building conversion; this approach has worked before and is shown to work in other jurisdictions.
- The area revitalization plans that are most successful are built by the community for the community; start that discourse and ask people what's important to them.
- Downtown core development or initiatives in municipalities should consider housing, economic and social needs.
- Strive to develop creative partnerships and incentivize innovative thinking.

## 3.6 PM Breakout Session B: Understanding Changing Demographics

This breakout session explored the changing demographics of the Region to empower participants to make informed choices to meet the housing needs of today and into the future. The panel was moderated by Heather Thomson, Executive Director, University of Alberta (Centre for Cities & Communities) with panelists:

- Allison Watson, Vice President, Leger
- Cheryl Whiskeyjack, Executive Director, Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society
- Laura Jo Gunter, President and CEO, NAIT
- Rispah Tremblay, Senior Manager, Settlement Services, Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers

### 3.6.1 Insights

Overall, the youth demographic is worried about their future; not many have savings, and many don't think they will be able to own a home (Leger Youth Study Report).

With a shortage of skilled trades labour in Alberta, post-secondary institutions are actively recruiting for these programs. Housing needs in Edmonton are crucial for various student profiles, including older students who want to live off-campus, and apprentices looking for short-term rentals.

Many groups moving to the Region, including Indigenous Peoples, and immigrants, are looking to connect with a community.

Newcomers and immigrants moving to the Region experience overcrowding and financial strain. They seek housing options located close to community services and with access to transportation services.

### 3.6.2 Solutions / Calls to Action

- Additional training for rental building managers:
  - A training program for rental building managers through the Edmonton Police Service and Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society has shown positive results by providing renters both housing and community support, including proactive social supports.
- Engage with younger generations to find out what they want, what their housing needs are.
- Look to calls to action of the TRC from a housing angle to evaluate where the needs are, how Indigenous Peoples are being supported.
- Work together to get more people interested in the trades, especially youth and women; seek to obtain funding and capital to get more trades people working.

## 3.7 PM Breakout Session C: Navigating Affordability Challenges

In this session, experts in finance and economics, the housing industry, and the non-profit sector shared insights on ways to address fiscal pressures on homeowners, market, and industry. The panel was moderated by Kalen Anderson, Executive Director, Urban Development Institute (UDI) – Edmonton Metro, with panelists:

- Shaun Cathcart, Senior Economist and Director of Housing Data and Market Analysis, Canadian Real Estate Association (CREA)
- Tim Richter, President & CEO, Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness
- Maurizio Capano, Principal, Probus Project Management Inc.

### 3.7.1 Insights

The Edmonton Metropolitan Region is still an affordable place to live for most people, but we're next in line for increasing prices and decreasing affordability.

Homelessness is a housing problem, specifically rental housing, and not caused by mental illness or addiction.

Only a very select group of people are building rental housing because of equity thresholds; affordable housing construction is challenging in the absence of subsidies.

A supply shortage can be expected due to immigration contributing to demand and the expectation of existing and current infrastructure and/or housing types becoming outdated or obsolete. We have the perfect storm: population is up and the need at lower end of housing spectrum is rising; housing supply is going down.

### 3.7.2 Solutions / Calls to Action

- Strong leadership is required to end homelessness – municipalities can play a role, but the province has to be engaged. Governments need to better coordinate with developers and other partners (e.g., social housing organizations) to identify what this Region needs and to standardize regulations.
- Leverage economies of scale for social housing by pooling resources in this Region.
- Benchmark the Region against the competition for improving process, timelines, costs, etc. (e.g., Texas permitting takes 5 days).

## 4.0 What We Heard: Bringing Together the Learnings of the Day and Opportunities for the Region

In this final panel session, moderator Mary Rowe, along with panelists Catherine Keill, Heather Thomson, and Kalen Anderson, reflected on the learnings of the day and shared some of their insights and takeaways.

### 4.1.1 Insights

Two major areas of focus in our Region, the aging baby boomer generation, and the immigration increase, are impacting housing and health care.

Generally, the housing industry is facing many challenges in this post-pandemic time including obsolete buildings, a struggling financial system, and rising costs that are unaffordable.

Housing developments face unique challenges in rural locations, namely higher infrastructure costs. Further, when services decline in these rural or remote communities, people move to urban communities to access services and maintain quality of life.

At the federal level, the National Housing Strategy addresses a range of issues to help Canadians access housing that meets their needs; a topic that has risen to the top of our national conversation.

Obtaining funding for housing initiatives, at all levels, remains a challenge.

#### 4.1.2 Solutions / Calls to Action

- Get a clear understanding of the gaps in housing across the various communities; adopt creative thinking and form innovative partnerships across the Region to address the identified needs of current and future population.
- Embrace place-based solutions. Communities have succeeded when they found workarounds, took risks, innovated, and created new models.
- Providing rural service hubs, where people can access social supports locally, could help people stay in their rural communities.
- Consider innovative housing models to keep seniors at home longer, and to provide alternative living options for other generations, such as for communal living.
- Look to the past to see successful programs and policies that might yield results today, for example, government funding models in place during the post-war boom.
- Our Region is diverse, one size does not fit all, but solutions can be modified to work in the metropolitan core, metropolitan area, and rural area. Housing for all requires a diversity of solutions, but good ideas can often be modified.

## 5.0 Next Steps

The EMRB board will review the insights and takeaways that emerged from the 2023 REenvision Housing Symposium. This input from leading experts, elected officials, developers, non-profits, and community builders will help inform what next steps the EMRB may consider.